

## 'Situating a non-conformist auteur' [Review] N. B. Jorge (2020) ReFocus: the films of Pedro Costa: producing and consuming contemporary art cinema

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# REVIEW: SITUATING A NON-CONFORMIST AUTEUR

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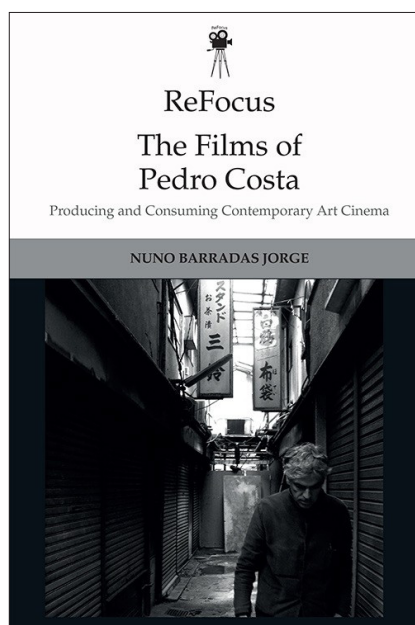
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## ABSTRACT

This review of Nuno Barradas Jorge's monograph *The Films of Pedro Costa* welcomes its detailed account of hitherto neglected dimensions of Costa's work, such as funding, relations with producers, technological aspects of production and postproduction, and the promotional labour of Costa's media interviews. But it argues that these undoubtedly useful insights come at the expense of sustained close attention to Costa's striking imagery and use of sound. The most glaring absences in the book are those of racial and class politics, and hence the interface between the two. Jorge's book is an important contextual study of Costa's oeuvre, but the immense aesthetic and political power of this filmmaking (both texts and collaborative processes of production) still eludes his grasp.

Keywords: Pedro Costa; Digital video; Aesthetics; Politics; Race; Class.

**JORGE, N. B. (2020). *REFOCUS: THE FILMS OF PEDRO COSTA: PRODUCING AND CONSUMING CONTEMPORARY ART CINEMA*. EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS**



Pedro Costa is one of the most important filmmakers in contemporary European cinema. Before 2000, he directed three fiction films on 35 mm: *Blood* (*O Sangue*, 1989), *Down to Earth* (*Casa de Lava*, 1994) and *Bones* (*Ossos*, 1997). During the past two decades, he has made two documentaries shot on digital video, *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* (*Où gît votre sourire enfoui?*, 2001), about the filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, and *Change Nothing* (*Ne Change Rien*, 2009), on the singer Jeanne Balibar. His most celebrated (and notorious) work, also shot on DV, has been produced in collaboration with members of the Cape Verdean diaspora and a handful of white neighbours living in poverty on the periphery of Lisbon. While these films include images of staggering beauty, composed, lit and framed with precision, they are always embedded in the social reality of the non-professional performers' lives, as evident in details of mise en scene, as well as the stories and memories that they recount. Costa's work has been critically well received from the start, and across the distinct phases of his career. But it has also generated vocal disdain in some quarters. Nevertheless, it is extraordinary that Nuno Barradas Jorge's monograph is the first on Costa to be published in English, a full twenty years after the release of *In Vanda's Room* (*No Quarto da Vanda*) in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

As Jorge notes in his introduction, Costa's "films seem to leave Anglo-American film critics indifferent for the most part, and at times exasperated" (2). Jorge does not go into detail, but a brief example will suffice. In 2006, *Variety* reviewer Justin Chang characterised *Colossal Youth* (*Juventude em Marcha*) as: "a numbing, nearly three-hour fusion of documentary and dramatic essay that will hold the Portuguese director's coterie of fans in rapt attention while proving a colossal bore to everyone else." (Chang, 2006; cf. Ebert, 2006). Jorge's well researched and detailed account goes some way towards establishing exactly what

<sup>1</sup> Two non-Anglophone monographs precede Jorge's: Guarnieri (2017) and Gavilanes Ribadeneira (2017).

Chang and other sceptics have been missing, while also noting the positive impact of such controversies on Costa's growing "cult status" (Jorge, 2020, p. 74).

It is of course impossible to track every aspect and nuance of a filmmaker's oeuvre and why it matters across a career of 30 years. The result is an inevitable tradeoff: what does Jorge discover or alert us to, and what does he downplay or leave out? He describes the book as an attempt "to provide both a comprehensive historical account and a critical examination of Costa's authorship practices and film aesthetics by addressing the central importance of the production and consumption contexts of his films" (Jorge, 2020, p. 2). This is a contextual study that attends to hitherto neglected dimensions of Costa's work, such as funding details and relations with producers, technological aspects of production and postproduction, and the promotional labour of Costa's media interviews, all aspects that have been more or less ignored in most prior studies. But these undoubtedly useful insights come at the expense of sustained close attention to Costa's striking imagery (including composition, deployment of light and colour, performance style, etc) and his use of sound. Admittedly, this kind of textual analysis has been quite dominant in other writing on Costa, so Jorge's decision to take a different tack is not surprising. But the book would have benefited from some further consideration of the crucial interfaces between aesthetics, politics and production methods. While the latter are prioritized, along with the circulation of Costa's films at festivals and on DVD and Blu-ray, the former two remain of secondary interest here. The monumentality of the characters, and the power and beauty of the visuals are not Jorge's primary concern. Moreover, he could have considered further the politics of producing such imagery in the impoverished settings of Fontainhas, Casal da Boba and, most recently Cova da Moura (the location for 2019's *Vitalina Varela*, released too late for Jorge to take account of here).

Nevertheless, Jorge's achievements are significant. One of his most important insights is into Costa's increasing reliance on post-production for his DV-shot films, from *In Vanda's Room* onwards. As Jorge asserts, such "back-end technological procedures", along with the funding details of Costa's digital filmmaking "tend to be obfuscated by a narrative of production around his films" (Jorge, 2020, p. 68). This narrative, of a collaborative, longitudinal, quotidian and almost heroic production process, embedded in some of the most deprived communities of Lisbon, is central to both Costa's self-presentation in the media, and to his political importance as a non-conformist auteur. Jorge is clearly not questioning the political impact of Costa's work, but he does usefully extend our understanding of the institutional and technological framework in which it sits. He devotes a chapter to the critical reception of Costa's films, in particular *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* and *Colossal Youth*. He notes that Costa "seems particularly aware of the necessity to provide detailed accounts of the collaborative and uncompromising production practices which make his films possible, as well as of possible aesthetic affiliations which inform his authorial process" (Jorge, 2020, p. 75). Jorge

draws on James F. English to approach film festivals as “economies of prestige” (Jorge, 2020, p. 70), and tracks Costa’s mixed fortunes at the hands of gatekeepers, including how festival juries at both Locarno and Cannes became irreparably split over, respectively, *In Vanda’s Room* and *Colossal Youth*. He also debates the application of the ‘slow cinema’ designation to Costa’s work (one that Costa himself has rejected).

Early in the book Jorge considers Costa’s “burgeoning cinephilia” (Jorge, 2020, p. 18) during the cultural efflorescence of the late 1970s and early 1980s, including the spread of film screenings in Lisbon, following the Carnation Revolution of 1974. He also briefly explores the influence of António Reis, who taught Costa at Lisbon Theatre and Film School in the late 1970s (Jorge, 2020, p. 19-20). Later on, he investigates Costa’s gallery work since 2001, and looks at how the “digital technological apparatus has helped to blur the boundaries between cinema and artistic practices situated in the white cube.” (Jorge, 2020, p. 95) In between these two chapters, Jorge offers a detailed discussion of 1994’s *Casa de Lava*, through its scripting, intertexts and influences (most notably Jacques Tourneur’s *I Walked with a Zombie* [1943]), and Costa’s increasing attention to the Cabo Verde location and its inhabitants. This chapter showcases Jorge’s strength in contextual research, but also his relative lack of interest in close textual analysis of Costa’s work. The political incoherence of *Casa de Lava*, a film that is both anti-colonial and exoticist, and is shaped to a large degree by Costa’s self-declared “aesthetic fascination” with Cabo Verde, remains under-explored, even while Jorge concludes that the film “seem[s] to indicate more of a fascination with the [local] participants’ condition rather than with giving narrative density to the postcolonial context of the location and its numerous implications” (Jorge, 2020, p. 43).

The most glaring absences in the book are those of racial and class politics, and hence the interface between the two. (The word ‘class’ appears only twice, ‘racial’ once, ‘diaspora’ twice, and ‘race’ only in the bibliography.) Given the centrality of such formations and systems of inequality to Costa’s films and filmmaking, this is a significant and surprising oversight. For example, Jorge devotes a chapter to exhibitions of new and repurposed work by Costa in gallery spaces without once considering the classed and raced dimensions of such spaces and their audiences, and the gulf between such institutional settings and the poverty and precarity of Costa’s preferred locations of Fontainhas, Casal da Boba and Cova da Moura.

The nearest Jorge comes to a discussion of class and race among the members of the Cape Verdean diaspora who participate in Costa’s films is his chapter on *Horse Money* (*Cavalo Dinheiro*, 2014). Here Jorge provides useful information about the genesis of the project, and the crucial contribution to the narrative made by its (non-professional) lead actor, Ventura: “The narrative [...] is structured around Ventura’s personal stories, re-enacted as conforming neither to a linear structure nor to the verisimilitude of chronological time” (Jorge, 2020, p. 132). He also gestures to “the miserable living conditions and harsh work routines lived

by migrant workers populating the building sites in Lisbon” (Jorge, 2020, p. 134) and quotes Michael Guarneri: “[b]y casting sixty-something Ventura to play twenty-year-old Ventura during Portugal’s revolutionary period [...] and by having him wander between medieval and present-day Lisbon, *Horse Money* clearly shows that nothing has really changed for him and his people” (Jorge, 2020, p. 135). However, this attention is not sustained for long, and the politics of Costa’s work (the process of production and the finished films) escapes proper scrutiny.

In sum, Jorge’s book is a detailed and important contextual study of Costa’s oeuvre, in particular its production and circulation. But the immense aesthetic and political power of this filmmaking (both texts and processes) still eludes his grasp.

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